

Sermons at Christ Church

Be One Body in Christ, Belonging to Each Other.

Lent III

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In today's gospel story, Jesus tells a parable about a man who had a fig tree in his vineyard from which he went for fruits. This particular fig tree was one of many. Fig trees typically bear fruits between May and September, and so it is likely that between the long stretch of three to four months, the man went out on multiple occasions for fruits. For years the man went for some fruits, but he didn't find any. Out of frustration he asked the gardener to cut it down and plant a new one which will bear fruit. The fruit that God desires to see is not one of being righteous but it is one of knowing that you can make a turn-and you should.

Surprisingly, the gardener disagreed. The gardener was very well aware that it took a fig tree between three to five years to grow and bear fruit, and so cutting the old one in order to plant a new one wasn't a good idea. In his wisdom, he pleaded with the owner, let's take care of it, let's tend to it, let's work on it, let's put manure and fertilizer around it, let's prune it and let's bring the best people to provide the best care.

If after providing tender loving care and the fig tree doesn't bear fruit. If after all the support and resources we pour into it, the fig tree doesn't produce any fruit. If you come around next year between May and September and find no fruit, then all well and good. We can cut it down and plant a new one with the hope that it will bear fruit. The fruit that God desires to see is not one of being righteous but it is one of knowing that you can make a turn-and you should.

Before Jesus told the parable, he cited two tragedies-the mixing of Galilean blood by Pilate and the falling of the tower of Siloam on eighteen people, killing all of them. The question was, did these tragedies happen because the victims were worse sinners? The answer reinforces the idea that God rejects any attempt at selective justice. God is not in the business of selective justice. If God were into that business, it would have been easy for some to claim that their level of productivity or their

ability to make a turn is somehow determines how God responds to them. It would have been easy for some to look at the misfortune of others and pronounce judgment on them, that somehow their misfortune is a result of some punishment.

If God were into the business of selective justice, it would have been easy for some to look at the tragedies in Ukraine, Sudan, Ethiopia, Syria or Palestine and determine that those people do deserve what is happening to them. If God were in the business of selective justice, some would have looked at the war rally in Moscow and say, see how God favors these people.

But God is not in the business of selective justice that is why He causes His sun to shine on both the righteous and the unrighteous. God is in the business of offering mercy, God is in the business of offering second chances to everyone. God is in the business of tending that one fig tree which has no hope of ever bearing fruit, just so it may bear fruit. God is in the business of leaving the ninety-nine sheep just for the sake of the one stray sheep-because the ninety-nine is of equal value as the missing sheep God is in the business of freeing us from the bondage of sin, and like the fig tree, offer us another shot at a productive accountable life. Another shot at bearing fruit. And the fruit that God desires to see is not one of being righteous but it is one of knowing that you can make a turn-and you should.

What excites me about today's gospel story is the idea of accountability which then gives room for God's second chances, third chances, fourth chances, fifth chances, forever chances because our sins are never enough for God to walk away from us. What God requires is a heart willing to seek repentance. A heart willing to be accountable. A heart willing to bear fruit-not by being righteous, but by acknowledging that although we have no power within ourselves to help ourselves, yet, we can make a turn because we have a God who desires in our ability to make a turn.

There is a story of Rose Macaulay, a well-known English novelist who had a long and happy affair with a married man. Upon the death of the man, Rose slowly recovered her lost faith, and began writing letters to an Anglican priest. In her book, *Letters to a Friend*, she describes her repentance and reorientation. She writes:

“I told you once that I couldn’t really regret the past. But now I do regret it, very much. It’s as if absolution and communion and prayer let us through into a place where we get a horribly clear view-a new view-so that we see all the waste, and the cost of it, and how its roots struck deep down into the earth, poisoning the springs of our own lives and other people’s. Such waste, such cost in human and spiritual values....Not all the long years of happiness together, of love and friendship and almost perfect companionship (in spite of its background) was worthwhile, it cost too much, to us and to other people. I didn’t know that before, but I do now....If only I had refused, and gone on refusing...I see now why belief in God fades away and has to go, while one is leading a life one knows to be wrong.

‘The two can’t live together. It does not give even intellectual acceptance a chance. Now it has a chance....After what has occurred to me lately, I know there’s a personal relationship with God.’ The power of repentance, the power of making a turn, the Greeks called it *metanoia*, it is a one hundred and eighty degree turn which makes you look north if you were previously looking south.

I learned many years ago that an honest man or woman lives their lives without regret. See, regret acknowledges any dishonesty or wrong on our part. And so the power of regret, of repentance, recognizes the value of a personal relationship with God and neighbor-and desires to make things right. And those who come upon this realization know that they simply cannot hold together their belief in God and a life they know to be wrong. Those who chance upon this idea commit themselves to a future lived better than the past. See, we cannot pray the past away, but just like the gardener was willing to offer the fig tree another chance at a future productivity, we can also look forward to a future where we can be accountable enough to bear fruit.

The point of Rose’s story is not to court our sympathy, but it is to lift up for our consideration the turn that she had made and the turn that we can also make. More than that is the grace of being like a fig tree which has been offered another shot at life-not because of who you are, what you have done or left undone, not because of where you live, not because of your station in life, but simply because the merciful gardener refuses to give up on you. God refuses to cut you down just so He can plant another tree. God refuses to spit you out because you do not bear fruit. Out there in the world, they tell us that three strikes and you’re out. But God gives us not one more chance, but as

many chances to make a turn, to bear fruit. And the fruit that God desires to see is not one of being righteous but it is one of knowing that you can make a turn-and you should.

Do you ever feel that the gardener-God has given up on you? Maybe that's how the people of Israel felt. Listen to Moses, we don't know you, and when I tell them about you, and they ask me your name, what should I say your name is? Who are you? Moses seem to be asking. Who is God to you? Who is this God who is asking you to repent, to make a turn? Who is this God whose measure of grace extends beyond centuries and touches every soul?

Like the people of Israel, we have been enslaved by sin for so long that we have forgotten about God or have a distant memory of what God can do in our lives. This morning is your burning bush experience, the bush is burning, and we have been invited to approach the holy, like Moses, take off your sandals and come as you are, prepared to make a turn, prepared to bear fruit. And the fruit that God desires to see is not one of being righteous but it is one of knowing that you can make a turn.

Remember, God's desire is for you to live abundantly, and God's power isn't designed to consume us but to refine us and help us shift our focus from the things we cannot control to the things that we can control.

We can control the good we do. We can control how we respond to evil. We can make a turn for the sake of a future life lived better than the past. And so this day, I challenge you to make a turn and I hope you will.

Amen.